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Pope's threat to quit over Poland reported

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WASHINGTON TIMES STAFF

NBC news says that Pope John Paul II, in a private letter to Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, threatened to resign and stand "shoulder to shoulder" with the people of Poland if Russia invaded Poland in 1980.

The assertion is contained in a special report scheduled for broadcast Sept. 21. The program, a documentary called "The Man Who Shot the Pope," also suggests that the pope was later targeted for assassination with the assistance of the Soviet and Bulgarian intelligence agencies. In this month's Reader's Digest, an article by Clare Sterling states that the assassination attempt on the pope was in retaliation for the pontiff's support of Solidarity, the free labor union now banned by the Polish government.

Sterling, who attended yesterday's preview of the program, said she had worked as a consultant on the NBC show.

A spokesman for the Vatican's apostolic delegation located here in Washington, called the story of the letter, reportedly sent by the pope to Brezhnev by a secret envoy, "something out of a novel." He would neither confirm nor deny the report and refused to identify himself. But he described the report as a "strong statement, and I'm surprised by it."

The program is narrated by NBC reporter Marvin Kalb.

In the program, Kalb says at one point: "NBC News has learned that in early August (1980), as the crisis escalated, the pope sent an envoy to the Kremlin whom we are pledged not to identify. He delivered an extraordinary handwritten letter, in Russian, from the pope to Soviet leader Brezhnev. It said that though the pope was head of a universal church, he was still a Pole, and deeply affected by developments in Poland. And if the Russians moved against Poland, he would lay down the crown of St. Peter and return to his homeland to stand shoulder to shoulder with his people."

Kalb goes on to say that the envoy "finally persuaded the Russians to gamble on coexistence with Solidarity rather than run the risk of an open confrontation with the pope."

Kalb does name a source for the story of the role the special envoy played — American-born Msgr. Hilary Franco. Monsignor Franco, pictured in the program, says: "I do believe that, even though the pope belongs to the world, he's humanly a man who loves his own country. And I am sure that the pope... would have tried... everything possible to stop an invasion of his homeland."

That remark is described by Kalb in the program as "public confirmation of the papal envoy's role." The monsignor is said to be a "Vatican insider" by Kalb.

The documentary, which runs an hour and at times resembles a travelogue, attempts to trace connections between Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman convicted in the May 1981 shooting of the pope to organized crime elements in Turkey, the Bulgarian secret service and the Soviet KGB.

"A Soviet connection is strongly suggested, but it cannot be proved," says Kalb. "It seems safe to conclude," he adds, that the guman had been "drawn into the clandestine network of the Bulgarian secret police and, by extension, the Soviet KGB.

Agca, convicted of murdering Turkish newspaper editor Abdi Ipecki, mysteriously escaped from a maximum security prison in Turkey and then appears to have been financed from some unkown source throughout his travels from prison to Rome and the attempted assassination NBC quotes Vladimir Sakharov, a former KGB agent who defected, as saying that information held by the Bulgarians would also be known by the KGB.

The pope, since the shooting, has lost his spirit and his "sense of fire and mission," the documentary concludes.

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